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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001599

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: ALEVIS PROTEST GOT'S POLICY ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

REF: A. 07 ISTANBUL 1088

[1](#)B. ANKARA 1103

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is a joint Embassy Ankara and Consulate General Istanbul cable.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary and comment: Several Alevi groups organized an August 24 rally in Istanbul's Taksim square to protest the GOT's policy of requiring primary and secondary public school students to take a religious education course. The groups claim the GOT is ignoring an October 9, 2007 European Court of Human Right's (ECHR) decision in favor of an Alevi parent who argued his child should be exempt from the courses, and are appealing to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers. Alevi protests, though unlikely to convince the GOT to abolish required religious education courses, may pressure PM Erdogan to make a meaningful overture to Alevis in the lead up to March 2009 local elections. After so much talk but little action, Turkey's highly skeptical Alevi population (approximately 15 million) will not be easily convinced until it sees tangible results. End summary and comment.

Alevis Stage Istanbul Protest

[1](#)3. (SBU) With the start of the 2008 school year, Alevi groups have raised their voices to protest the government's continuation of mandatory religious education courses in public schools. An estimated 150 Alevis held a sit-in protest in Istanbul's Taksim Square August 24, demanding abolishment of the compulsory high school religion course and compliance with the ECHR's October 2007 decision. The four participating Alevi organizations -- Alevi-Bektasi Federation, Pir Sultan Abdul Cultural Association, Kocgir Cultural Association, and the Free Democratic Alevi Union -- announced that protests would continue every Sunday for six weeks. Alevi Bektasi Federation President Ali Balkiz told us the groups would continue the protests indefinitely and possibly expand them to other cities.

Alevis Contend GOT Ignoring ECHR Decision

[1](#)4. (U) The ECHR's October 9 ruling held that the GOT had breached the rights -- accorded by the European Convention on Human Rights, of which Turkey is a signatory -- of Alevis Hasan Zengin and his daughter Eylem by denying Zengin's

request to exempt his daughter from compulsory religious courses, which many Alevis claim have a Sunni bias. The court determined that given the Sunni-oriented curriculum of the courses, there was no appropriate exemption procedure in place to ensure the religious freedom rights of non-Sunni parents (ref A).

¶5. (SBU) Contacts in the Ministry of Education's office of religious education told us the ECHR decision is moot because while the case was proceeding the Ministry of Education revised the content course textbooks to include information about non-Sunni religions. Balkiz criticized the GOT's position, explaining that the 10-page addition to 100-page textbooks does not alleviate the overwhelming Sunni bias. The new text includes only a few references to well-known and respected Alevis but makes no attempt to explain Alevi history, rituals, or beliefs. Many Alevis follow the teachings of Haci Bektas, a Persian Sufi mystic and humanist; the revised textbooks overlook his importance to Alevism and refer to Haci Bektas simply as a Muslim scholar, according to Balkiz.

¶6. (SBU) Balkiz said the Federation on August 13 appealed to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers the GOT's alleged failure to implement the ECHR ruling. He expects the Committee to issue a decision by December. Balkiz believes sustained pressure from EU and COE officials will help persuade the GOT to implement the decision. He noted that following a similar dispute, religious education classes in Greece were reclassified as elective courses, putting them in

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compliance with Council of Europe guidelines.

Small Steps of Progress

¶7. (U) Responding to a key Alevi demand, on September 3 the Kusadasi Municipal Council, south of Izmir, officially recognized an Alevi worship place (cem house) as a temple. AKP mayor Fuat Akdogan and senior Alevi leader Husnu Kirnali explained to the press the distinction would allow the cem house to receive municipal water free of charge, as is the case with mosques. The unanimous decision taken by council members from AKP, opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and opposition National Action Party (MHP), would also serve as an example of tolerance for other municipalities to follow, according to the mayor.

¶8. (C) AKP MP Reha Camuroglu, an Alevi who resigned June 11 as PM Erdogan's main advisor on Alevi affairs (ref B), told us he welcomed the decision but believes it will not lead to significant change in the near term. He believes the GOT will be reluctant to tackle controversial issues related to Alevis in the lead up to March 2009 local elections. Frustrated by what he perceives as AKP's lack of support for his efforts to address Alevi issues, Camuroglu said he may leave AKP if PM Erdogan does not signal a willingness to address important Alevi and other human rights issues. Naming more moderate ministers in a cabinet reshuffle would be one such signal, according to Camaroglu. Another would be to implement the Kusadasi municipality's example on a wider scale. Ali Kahraman, leader of the Alevi Ege neighborhood near Ankara, told us he views the Kusadasi development as blatant vote-buying.

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